

## Early Dakota trails and settlements at Centerville, Minn. /

### EARLY DAKOTA TRAILS AND SETTLEMENTS AT CENTERVILLE, MINN.\*

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In the southeastern corner of Anoka county in this state is the township of Centerville. In this township is a cluster of five or six small lakes, the outlet of which is Rice creek, which flows thence southwesterly into the Mississippi river, just north of the city limits of Minneapolis. From these lakes the city of St. Paul receives in part its water supply at the present time. In some places these lakes are very close together, only a few yards of solid ground intervening. Some six miles farther north is another lake about a mile in diameter, called Howard lake, which is also drained by Rice creek. Not many years ago these lakes were frequented by thousands of wild ducks and geese, and I believe that to a very large extent this is still true. Howard lake and several of the Centerville lakes are very shallow, and wild rice grows in them to such an extent that in the late summer the water is entirely obscured and they look like green meadows. The waterfowl feed upon the rice, and late in the fall, when the stalks have bent over and fallen beneath the surface of the water, they dive after the rice, refusing to leave this feeding ground until the last open space has frozen across. In the spring they are back again as soon as there is a crack in the ice big enough to hold them, much thinner in body, and ravenous for another taste of their favorite food.

A short distance westward from the Centerville lakes is a tract of marsh land, which stretches northeasterly almost to the northern boundary of Anoka county. Much of this marsh land has now been drained, but it originally covered probably seventy or eighty

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square miles, and early settlers tell of a time when they could go the entire distance from Centerville to Linwood in boats. Much of the country surrounding Centerville 316 is well wooded, and wild game abounded in the vicinity long after it had disappeared from other parts of the state. For illustration, about 1856 a hunter who had gone into this region drove into St. Paul with a four-ox team and a load of forty buck deer.

It is not to be supposed that the Indians had overlooked this ideal location for one of their settlements; and I believe it can be shown that, except for a few years when the war between the Dakotas and the Ojibways was at its height, there has been no time during the past two hundred and fifty years when there has not been an Indian village or a cluster of Indian villages in the vicinity of these lakes. Indeed, a large proportion of the present inhabitants of Centerville township have an admixture of Indian blood; and to this day the language of the Canadian French traders and bushrangers, who intermarried with the Ojibways, is quite as familiar there as English.

I shall call as my first witness Nicholas Perrot. Perrot was credited with a better understanding of the mode of life and habits of thought of the western Indians than any other man of his time. He was not exactly an explorer. He was content to be years behind other white men in his first sight of the Mississippi river, but he made himself familiar with the geography and history of the region by questioning the best informed among the Indians. I quote from Perrot's Memoir as translated for the Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Volume XVI, pages 16–19:

The Outaouas finally decided to select the island called Pelée [Prairie island] as the place of their settlement, and they spent several years there in peace, often receiving visits from the Scioux. But on one occasion it happened that a hunting-party of Hurons encountered and slew some Scioux. The Scioux, missing their people, did not know what had become of them; but after a few days they found their corpses, from which the heads had been severed. Hastily returning to their village, to carry this sad news, they met on the way some Hurons, whom they made prisoners; but when they reached home the chiefs

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liberated the captives and sent them back to their own people. The Hurons, so rash as to imagine that the Scioux were incapable of resisting them without iron weapons and firearms, conspired with the Outaouas to undertake a war against them, purposing to drive them 317 from their own country in order that they themselves might thus secure a greater territory in which to seek their living. The Outaouas and Hurons accordingly united their forces and marched against the Scioux. They believed that as soon as they appeared the latter would flee, but they were greatly deceived; for the Scioux sustained their attack, and even repulsed them, and, if they had not retreated, they would have been utterly routed by the great number of men who came from other villages to the aid of their allies. The Outaouas were pursued even to their settlement, where they were obliged to erect a wretched fort; this, however, was sufficient to compel the Scioux to retire, as they did not dare to attack it.

The continual incursions made by the Scioux forced the Outaouas to flee. They had become acquainted with a river, which is called Black; they entered its waters and, ascending to its source, the Hurons found there a place suitable for fortifying themselves and establishing their village. The Outaouas pushed farther on, and proceeded as far as Lake Superior, where they fixed their abode at Chagouamikon [Chequamegon]. The Scioux, seeing that their enemies had departed, remained quietly, without pursuing them farther; but the Hurons were not willing to keep the peace, and sent out several hostile bands against the Scioux. These expeditions had very little success; and, moreover, drew upon them frequent raids from the Scioux, which compelled them to abandon their fort, with great loss of their men, and go to join the Outaouas at Chagouamikon. As soon as they arrived there, they planned to form a war-party of a hundred men, to march against the Scioux and avenge themselves. It is to be observed that the country where they roam is nothing but lakes and marshes, full of wild rice; these are separated from one another by narrow tongues of land, which extend from one lake to another not more than thirty or forty paces, and sometimes no more than five or six. These lakes and marshes form a tract more than fifty leagues square, and are traversed by no river save that of Louisiana [the

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Mississippi]; its course lies through the midst of them, and part of their waters discharge into it. Other waters fall into the Ste. Croix River, which is situated northeast of them, at no great distance. Still other marshes and lakes are situated to the west of the St. Peter River, into which their waters flow. Consequently, the Scioux are inaccessible in so swampy a country, and cannot be destroyed by enemies who have not canoes, as they have, with which to pursue them. Moreover, in those quarters only five or six families live together as one body, forming a small village; and all the others are removed from one another at certain distances, in order that they may be able to lend a helping hand at the first alarm. If any one of these little villages be attacked, the enemy can inflict very little damage upon it, for all its neighbors promptly assemble, and give prompt aid wherever it is needed. Their method of navigation in lakes of this kind is, to push through the wild rice with their 318 canoes, and, carrying these from lake to lake, compel the fleeing enemy to turn about, and thus bewilder him; they, meanwhile, pass from one lake to another until they thread those mazes and reach the firm ground.

The hundred Hurons became involved among these swamps and without canoes; they were discovered by some Scioux, who hastened to spread the alarm everywhere. That was a populous nation, scattered along the circumference of the marshes, in which they gathered abundance of wild rice; this grain is the food of those people, and tastes better than does rice. More than 3,000 Scioux came together from every side, and besieged the Hurons. The loud noise, the clamor, and the yells with which the air resounded showed them that they were surrounded on all sides, and that their only resource was to make head against the Scioux (who were eagerly striving to discover their location), unless they could find some place by which they could retreat. In this straitened condition, they concluded that they could not do better than to hide among the wild rice, where the water and mud reached almost to their chins. Accordingly, they dispersed in various directions, taking great pains to avoid noise in their progress. The Scioux, who were sharply searching for them, and desired only to meet them in battle, found very few of them, and were fully persuaded that the Hurons were hidden in the wild rice; but they were

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greatly astonished at seeing only the trail made in entering the lake, and no trace of the Hurons' departure. They bethought them of this device: they stretched across the narrow strips of land between the lakes the nets used in capturing beavers; and to these they attached small bells, which they had obtained from the Outaouas and their allies in the visits which they had made to those tribes, as above related. They divided their forces into numerous detachments, in order to guard all the passages, and watched by day and night, supposing that the Hurons would take the first opportunity to escape from the danger which threatened them. This scheme indeed succeeded; for the Hurons slipped out under cover of the darkness, creeping on all fours, not suspecting this sort of ambushade; they struck their heads against the nets, which they could not escape, and thus set the bells to ringing. The Scioux, lying in ambush, made prisoners of them as soon as they stepped on land. Thus from all that band but one man escaped; he was called in his own language Le Froid ["he who is cold"]. This same man died not a long time ago.

In regard to the location of these Dakota settlements among the rice lakes, Perrot says that the St. Croix river "is situated northeast of them, at no great distance." If he means this to apply to the Mille Lacs region, it is simply not true. But it is true of the little cluster of rice lakes at Centerville. Moreover, Rice creek, which runs through these Centerville lakes, 319 may be traced by traveling in a northeasterly direction to a point a mile or two beyond Howard lake, until one comes to its source in a small lake within half a mile of Forest lake in the northern part of Washington county. The outlet of Forest lake is the South branch of Sunrise river, which runs northeasterly throughout its course and joins the St. Croix river, agreeably to Perrot's statement that from these lakes and marshes "other waters fall into the St. Croix river." I am inclined to think that in this portion of his statement Perrot is not describing the general location of the Dakota settlements, which he says "form a tract more than fifty leagues square," but the particular place where this battle occurred.

Again, he describes the character of the country as consisting of "lakes and marshes, full of wild rice; these are separated from one another by narrow tongues of land, which extend from one lake to another not more than thirty or forty paces, and sometimes no

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more than five or six.” This would certainly not be true of the entire Dakota country. But it is eminently true of the Centerville lakes, as any duck hunter who has stood on the narrow runways between these lakes will testify.

It seems probable that Perrot was writing from descriptions given him by Indians who took part in the battle, and not from personal observation. This battle appears to have taken place in the autumn of 1661, and Perrot did not visit the Dakota country until about 1683, more than twenty years later, although he was living among the Wisconsin Indians before 1671.

The ingenuity of the Dakotas in setting their trap for the Hurons will occasion less surprise when it is remembered that this identical device was practised by Radisson to guard the entrance to his fort at Chequamegon bay two years previous,\* and that these little bells were among the tools and trinkets which Groseilliers and Radisson sold to the Dakotas at the time of the grand council at Knife lake. The Hurons undoubtedly became familiar with the Dakota settlements at Centerville during the time of their residence on Prairie island. The war upon the Dakotas was evidently the result of their knowledge of the easy indolence with which the Dakotas lived in this land

\* Minnesota Historical Society Collections, vol. X, Part II, p. 485.

320 of plenty, while they themselves and their Ottawa allies were enduring the horrors of the famine of 1659–60;† and they believed that the Dakotas with nothing but stone weapons to bring to the defense, could never stand against a determined attack with powder and ball.

† Ibid., pp. 487–492.

My second witness is Father Hennepin. It seems tolerably certain that there were Dakota villages at Centerville in Hennepin's time. His statement of the matter is not clear, but his language seems to imply that on his overland trip, after arriving at the first Dakota villages (presumably those at Centerville), he traveled five days in order to reach Mille Lacs. After

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telling of the arrival in the vicinity of the site of St. Paul of himself and his two companions, with the Dakotas who had captured them, Hennepin says (A New Discovery, original English edition, page 163; edition edited by R. G. Thwaites, page 247):

Here the Barbarians order'd us to land in a Creek of the River Meschasipi; after which, they held an Assembly, to consult what they were to do with us. In short, they separated, and gave us to three of their Chiefs, instead of their Sons which had been kill'd in the War: Then they seiz'd our Canou, and took away all our Equipage. The Canou they pull'd to pieces, for fear it might assist us to return to their Enemies: Their own they hid amongst the Alders, to use again when they should have occasion to hunt that way. So that tho'. we might have gone conveniently enough quite up into their Country by Water, yet were we oblig'd, by their Conduct, to travel no less than sixty Leagues a-foot.

It is difficult to explain this conduct of the Indians except on the theory that many of them lived at Centerville, which could not be reached by way of Rum river.

My third witness is Jonathan Carver, who visited what is now Minnesota in 1766–67. In the book entitled *Kathio*, by the late Hon. J. V. Brower, attention is called, on page 92, to the fact that Carver's map shows Dakota villages near Centerville and Howard lake.

My fourth witness is the ill-fated James W. Lynd, who was the first to fall in the Sioux massacre of 1862. Fortunately the manuscript for the book on the Dakotas which he had in preparation was found after his death, although in a mutilated condition, 321 and is now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society. A portion of this manuscript was published in Volume II of this Society's Historical Collections. My quotation is from an unpublished portion of this manuscript (page 18). Lynd says:

They [the Mdewakantonwan tribe] were at one period split up into two bodies, one called Ma-tantonwan, and the other Wakpa-aton-wedan. The signification of the former is unknown; the latter means Those-Who-Dwell-on-the-Creek, because they had their village

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on Rice creek, a stream which empties into the Mississippi seven miles above the falls of St. Anthony.

Both these names given by Lynd may be recognized in the list of the bands of the "Sioux of the East," given in Le Sueur's journal. "Mantantons," Le Sueur says, means "Village of the Great Lake which empties into a small one;" and "Ouadebatons" he translates as "the River Village," showing apparently that in the year 1700 there was a village on Rice creek.

The Dakotas appear to have abandoned their settlement at Centerville about the end of the eighteenth century. The Mdewakantonwans had been driven from Mille Lacs about the middle of the century by the invading Ojibways, and now found it necessary to make a further retreat. Their settlements at Kaposia, on the Mississippi just below St. Paul, and at Lake Calhoun, now became their outposts on the side exposed to Ojibway attack. But they still made annual visits to Centerville for the purpose of gathering the wild rice. Lieutenant Z. M. Pike wrote in his journal under date of Sept. 21, 1805 (edition edited by Elliott Coues, Vol. I, pages 74–76):

Embarked at a seasonable hour; breakfasted at the Sioux village on the east side [Kaposia]. It consists of eleven lodges, and is situated at the head of an island just below a ledge of rocks. The village was evacuated at this time, all the Indians having gone out to the lands to gather fols avoin [wild rice].

Centerville appears to have been without permanent inhabitants from this time until white people had made settlements at St. Paul and in the St. Croix valley, soon after which a few mixed bloods and Ojibways took up their abode there and furnished the nucleus for the present village. 21

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From my History of Anoka County, 320 pages, published in 1905, the following notes are added, relating to the first white settlements in this township.

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The lakes of Centerville had long been a paradise for hunters and trappers, but no permanent dwelling was erected until the arrival of F. W. Traves in 1850. In the spring of 1852, Francis Lamotte came, and in the fall Charles Peltier, Peter Cardinal, and F. X. Lavallee. These four settled in section 23. Joseph Houle lived there during the same year, but did not make a claim until some years later. During the winter Oliver Dupre arrived, and the next year came Paul and Oliver Peltier.

In 1854 Charles Peltier built a sawmill, and in company with F. X. Lavallee and Francis Lamotte platted the village of Centerville. The settlers in the village and vicinity were mostly French, and this came to be known as the French settlement.

Meanwhile German settlers had been making claims near the home of Mr. Traves in the western part of the town, among them Henry Wenzel, who came in 1855, and this place was known as the German settlement.

The town of Centerville was organized August 11, 1857.

The first religious service was at the residence of Francis Lamotte, where mass was said by Father Kaller in 1854, who continued to visit the place occasionally for several years. He was succeeded by Father Robert, and in 1861 by Rev. Joseph Goiffon. The Church of St. Genevieve of Paris was erected in 1859.